

Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Authors: Lucy Leon & Jacqui Broadhead

Key Findings

- In 2021/22, **142 UK local authorities reported providing financial support to 10,640 destitute migrant people**, who are excluded from the mainstream welfare safety net due to their immigration status. This number includes **1,658 vulnerable adults, 3,108 families and 5,831 children**.
- Many local authorities were unable to supply accurate data on this cohort, and data is not held by the Home Office. Therefore, this data provides the **first UK wide baseline indication of the supported vulnerable, destitute migrant population**, though it is likely to be a significant underestimate.
- If replicated for all UK local authorities, **we estimate that support was provided to c.18,000 people in 2021/2022, including 5,400 families, 10,500 children and 2,700 vulnerable adults and at an estimated annual cost of £102 million for local authorities**.
- The estimated **numbers of families supported in England and Wales have risen by over 150% since 2012/13, whilst estimated costs for local authorities supporting families have increased by almost 230%** at a time when many councils are under severe financial strain, in particular within social services and with councils receiving no dedicated funding for this support.
- The **number and range of people impacted is likely to grow as a consequence of recent policy changes** including the Illegal Migration Act as well as the [increasing numbers of people subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' visa condition](#), restricting access to mainstream benefits. Almost 2.6 million people living in the UK at the end of 2022 held visas with the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition – this represents an increase of over 1 million in just two years.
- Our research found **that cases were drawn from across the immigration system**, including people with leave to remain. Since Brexit, there has been a sharp increase in the number of European nationals impacted.
- Research in local authority areas found **significant gaps in access to this 'parallel safety net'** provided by local authorities, including destitute people assessed as not meeting the high social care threshold and being refused support, people who are unaware they can access social care support and people too worried about the potential ramifications on their immigration status to present at social care.
- In 2015, our research described local authority support for destitute migrant families as a 'parallel welfare safety net', albeit highly conditional and providing patchy and inconsistent support. In 2024, we find that **this parallel welfare system is dysfunctional and unable to provide adequate support for the increasing numbers of people facing destitution** and unable to access the mainstream welfare system. Whilst there are some important pockets of good practice to learn from, systemically **the system is patchy and does not meet the scale of need**.

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Background

Since 2019, there has been a 136% increase in the number of destitute migrant people in the UK and in 2022, over a quarter (27%) of destitute households were headed up by migrant people (Fitzpatrick et al, 2023). In many of these cases, the destitution arose primarily from the households' immigration status, specifically the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) restriction, which restricts access to the welfare safety net (including most mainstream benefits such as Universal Credit as well as passported benefits such as housing benefit and child tax credit). Attempts to tackle destitution in the UK therefore must consider the characteristics of the NRPF policy, its impacts and the characteristics of the parallel welfare safety net which is in place for (some) migrant people and delivered by local authorities ([Leon, 2023](#)).

COMPAS' [Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK](#) research project explores the effects of UK immigration policy on migrant destitution in the UK, highlighting the scale and changing face of migrant destitution and the vital role of local authorities¹ in supporting vulnerable people facing destitution. For certain groups of vulnerable people facing destitution, local authorities have a legal duty to provide accommodation and/or subsistence, effectively providing a de facto 'parallel welfare safety net' ([Spencer & Price, 2015](#)). Building on COMPAS' previous [research](#) on English and Welsh local authority responses to safeguard destitute migrant families, the study widens the scope to cover all four nations of the UK and includes families with dependent children and vulnerable adults with care needs.

Research Methods

The study involved a mixed methods approach including a survey sent to all UK local authorities, secondary data analysis of administrative data and deep dive qualitative research in 7 case study sites, interviewing key local authority staff, local stakeholders and partners as well as with people with lived experience.

Research findings

1. Numbers and characteristics of the vulnerable migrant population facing destitution

- **In 2021/22, 10,640 destitute vulnerable migrant people were reported to be supported by 142 local authorities and health and social care trusts across the UK, at a reported cost of £55m. This includes 1,658 vulnerable adults, 3,108 families and 5,831 children.** These numbers provide the first UK wide baseline indication of a population significantly impacted by the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) immigration policy, restricting migrants' access to the welfare safety net, as well as the first UK wide estimate of the number of vulnerable adults.
- Whilst this report provides a baseline, we know that there is **significant under-reporting by local authorities, which indicates that the reported numbers are likely to be an underestimate.** Over half of the 142 local authorities providing data through the survey were only able to provide patchy and limited data; this was particularly acute for vulnerable single adults, a group we know little about. **We estimate that if all UK local authorities recorded data, the total number of people supported may be around 18,000 people, including around 5,400 families, 10,500 children and 2,700 vulnerable adults, at an estimated annual cost of £102m to local authorities.**
- Our estimates indicate that the **number of families supported in England and Wales has risen by over 150% since 2012/13, whilst costs for local authorities supporting families have soared by almost 230%** at a time when many councils are already feeling the pressure with overstretched social care budgets. The number and range of people impacted may continue to grow as a consequence of recent policy changes including the Illegal Migration Act as well as [the increasing numbers of people subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' visa condition](#), restricting access to mainstream benefits.
- Our qualitative research found **significant gaps in access to this parallel safety net**, including people facing destitution but assessed as not meeting the social care threshold and being refused support, people who are unaware they can access social care support and people too worried about the potential ramifications to present at social care, in case they are reported to the Home Office or have their children taken into care.
- Whilst local authority data does not clearly record immigration status, our evidence shows that **cases are drawn from across the immigration system, including people with leave to remain and people with an irregular status including:**

¹ Throughout the report, for the sake of brevity we will be referring to 'local authorities' and 'local government' in a broad sense of any public authority in a local area with relevant powers and duties, whilst recognising that in Northern Ireland support is largely provided by five Health and Social Care Trusts.

- * Family cases included families on the 10-year route to settlement, families fleeing domestic violence, student visa holders as well as a rise in mixed immigration status households often with complex immigration cases.
- * Case studies for vulnerable adults included people who have lived and worked in the UK for decades, dipping in and out of irregularity but were no longer able to work due to health issues, people with complex health and care needs, people with a terminal illness including people who have tragically died waiting for their case to be resolved.
- Across both families and vulnerable adults, we note a **sharp increase post-Brexit in the number of European families and vulnerable adult cases**, many of whom either missed the EUSS deadline or were granted pre-settled status but are not exercising their qualifying right to be able to access public funds. Scottish local authorities saw a 138% increase in the number of EEA nationals being referred in 2021/22 compared to 2020/21. In some local authorities around the UK, EEA nationals make up 60–70% of their NRPF cases.
- **Over 130 nationalities received local authority support:** Nigerian nationals make up the largest cohort of people supported (24% of all cases), followed by smaller numbers of Ghanaian, Pakistani, Jamaican, Indian and Bangladeshi nationals. European nationals from Romania, Portugal and Poland now also feature within the top ten nationalities supported.
- **The vast majority (86%) of parents in supported families in 2021/22 were female**, whilst 59% of vulnerable adults supported were male and 41% female.
- **Over half (53%) of the total number of people supported by local authorities in 2021/22 were in Greater London.** There are low but [increasing numbers of people](#) supported in Scotland. In Wales and Northern Ireland, our qualitative evidence also indicates a rise in cases; however, there are low numbers of recorded cases due to challenges with social care data collection.

2. How has local government and social services support for destitute migrants changed since our 2015 report?

- COMPAS' report published in 2015 found evidence of a parallel welfare safety net for destitute migrant families. **In 2024, we find that this parallel system is creaking and dysfunctional – unable to provide adequate support for those living in, or at risk of, destitution. Whilst there are important pockets of good practice to learn from, systemically the system is patchy and does not meet the scale of need.** Whilst this remains true for migrant families, this is particularly the case for vulnerable single adults, who struggle to access any form of safety net.
- **Local authorities face significant costs supporting vulnerable migrant people facing destitution. In 2021/22, this amounted to a reported £55 million in the 142 local authorities that shared data with us. We estimate that if all local authorities recorded data, the cost would be £102 million, with local authorities receiving no dedicated funding from central government for this statutory duty.**
- **In England and Northern Ireland, there is no statutory guidance on how to assess and provide support.** Scotland and Wales have developed their own statutory guidance for local authorities. There is evidence of guidance implementation in Scotland, but limited evidence of implementation in Welsh local authorities.
- With no dedicated central government funding and gaps in statutory guidance and training, **many of the issues, including persistent gatekeeping, inconsistent and inadequate support, necessity of having an advocate to access support highlighted in our 2015 research persist:**
 - * Whilst some local authorities with lower numbers of destitute migrant cases have sought to use their discretion to ensure destitute people are provided with support, other local authorities have introduced **more robust gatekeeping**. As a result, many people presenting encounter significant hurdles, finding themselves locked out of support. People with lived experience have described the **local authority assessment to access social care as a humiliating, distressing and intrusive process**, leaving them feeling judged as parents, disrespected and disbelieved.
 - * There is a **significant discrepancy in the subsistence rates local authorities around the UK provide, with no clear statutory minimum standard**. As a result, families face a postcode lottery of support and at best, receive significantly below the level they would receive on universal credit and in some areas, even below asylum support rates, despite recent [case law](#) and [guidance from the NRPF Network](#)
- Local government staff across the UK raised the lack of senior leadership on NRPF policy and provision meaning that this “parallel welfare system” is instead **organised and delivered by frontline practitioners at an operational level, with very limited policy and strategy perspective from senior leadership.**

This significantly inhibits the capacity of local government to meet its wider strategic priorities such as ending rough sleeping, improving public health, preventing domestic abuse and tackling inequalities.

- In spite of this, the pandemic saw a wider visibility for understanding and tackling migrant destitution, with public health being prioritised over migration governance. **Some pockets of good practice have emerged as some UK local authorities have sought to tailor their approach to provide early intervention models, alternative housing, increase subsistence payments as well as commissioning immigration legal advice** to support residents with regularising their status to be able to access mainstream benefits. Devolved administrations have also drawn on their devolved powers to pilot innovative approaches – in Scotland, the Ending Destitution Together strategy and the recently updated COSLA guidance for local authorities written in partnership with the third sector have aimed to take a more strategic approach to tackling migrant destitution.
- Since our 2015 research, councils have benefited from using [NRPF Connect](#) to get timely immigration status information and Home Office case progression, as well as the NRPF Network's advice and guidance resources, training, and efforts to raise policy recommendations with central government. However, in recent years, **significant delays in Home Office decision-making, a rise in complex immigration cases with mixed immigration status households and a national shortage in legal aid provision**, have led to further challenges for local authorities with trying to progress people's immigration cases. **The length of time families are spending on local authority support has significantly increased** – in 2012/13, 43% of families spent 1 – 5 years on support, in 2021/22, 65% of families spent 1 – 5 years on support.

3. How have the outcomes for those living in destitution or at risk of destitution changed since our 2015 report?

- People's outcomes **continue to be negatively impacted by NRPF** as many find themselves locked out of the mainstream safety net even when facing destitution. Many people continue **to exhaust all options before turning to the local authority, remaining dependent on extended family and their communities**, not wanting to seek support from the state in case it led to further ramifications for their immigration status.
- **Fear was a recurrent thread across our interviews with both families and adults who were terrified of the prospect of being reported to the Home Office or having their children taken away.** People wanted councils to work more pro-actively with community organisations to build trust and provide accessible information on what support is on offer for people too fearful to seek help, despite facing hardship.
- Local authority support can offer a lifeline to families and adults accessing social care, with financial support through subsistence payments making a significant difference. However many people raised **issues with how financial support was administered**, including long delays waiting to receive any financial support, receiving vouchers instead of cash, having to choose between spending money on food or energy as the rates did not meet their needs and the infantilising and intrusive way social care teams would monitor their expenditure.
- Housing provided by local authorities can offer a way out of destitution; however, it often did not feel like a place of safety with both families and vulnerable adults describing the **frequent moves at short notice as well as the poor housing conditions not meeting their needs, leading to health complications.** Despite the poor conditions, people felt too fearful to complain in case of repercussions on their immigration case:

“You are scared to complain about the house. The kitchen ceiling is falling down, there is a lot of mould in my son's room, and damp everywhere. But I can't complain as they might try to deport me. I can't complain anymore because I'm scared.” (Efua, parent)

- Whilst some local authorities have worked on sourcing more appropriate self-contained temporary accommodation for vulnerable people, in many areas there has been **an increase in the long-term use of hotels (without any cooking facilities):**

“I have very young kids but the council still leave us in a hotel. There are no means of cooking, sterilising, freezing food. We are not allowed to microwave. Both kids were admitted to hospital due to the conditions of the hotel where we were placed.” (Zainab, parent)

- The **emotional toll of jumping through hoops to access local authority support** and the gruelling impact of intrusive social care assessments left many people not feeling believed, listened to or respected:

“They put you up and down before agreeing to give you anything, so you are nothing by the time they finally agree to give you a house” (Aisha, parent)

- Many people faced **uncertainty once they were transitioned out of social care support** – for some, this involved a positive transition to mainstream housing assistance but for others, their options remained unclear and they felt they were being passed from pillar to post, **impacting their mental health**:

“When I asked [the council] my options when my support was being cut off, they said they couldn’t tell me but that the homeless charity might step in. The homelessness charity referred me to an immigration charity, but they only help me with my immigration. It is very hard to navigate the system. They toss you from here to there and nobody will give you a definite answer of their responsibility. And when they’ve finished with you, you have depression. Some people are suicidal. The physical movement is nothing compared to the mental strain of being moved from one team to another. No one is responsible for you, they toss you around.” (Michael, in his 70s)

- With robust social care eligibility criteria, many people still remain **locked out of all welfare safety nets, unable to ever access social care, refuges or places of safety, despite presenting with vulnerabilities and at risk of harm**. As a result, some people may be able to access limited short-term support through charities but many may find themselves dependent on exploitative support networks, stuck in abusive relationships or facing street homelessness:

“I don’t have anything at the moment. It’s really hard, trying to get help. The council said I can’t access anything and I’m not eligible for anything. I go into depression and mental health problem. What can you do? What chance I have to survive? Everywhere I go, everyone says I am not eligible.” (Iona, European national and victim of modern slavery)

Implications for policy and practice

Our research finds an increasing number of migrant people at risk of destitution and a dysfunctional parallel safety net, which is struggling to provide the support necessary to avoid significant levels of migrant destitution.

The Home Office chooses to impose the ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) immigration policy, restricting migrants’ access to the welfare safety net, [arguing](#) that it is essential to prevent burdens on the taxpayer and to improve integration. Analysing the impact of this policy choice on migration governance is not within the scope of this report. However, it is worth noting that **removing the NRPF restriction and providing access to the mainstream welfare safety net would, at a stroke, remove the need for a parallel welfare safety net**, reducing the cumulative pressure and disadvantage the policy places on social care and the severe impact it has on people facing destitution and homelessness, as well as supporting the meeting of other policy goals such as [ending roughing sleeping](#), reducing homelessness, providing children with the best start in life and helping parents to work. Access would remain conditional and means-tested as for all other recipients of Universal Credit.

Our evidence, alongside work by the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#), highlights the [increasing numbers of people holding visas subject to the NRPF condition](#) and its consequences for current and future migrant destitution. The Home Office have a public sector duty to consider the impact of policies on other government departments’ priorities and to consider how policies contribute towards pushing people into the sharp end of poverty and destitution. **Our findings show a wide call from local government, legal advice organisations, third sector organisations and experts by experience for a significant reform of the system, including a call to end the use of the NRPF condition.**

Our policy implications look at reforming and improving a patchy and inadequate parallel system operated by local government, however this does not preclude the bigger question of whether this system is fit for purpose at all.

In the absence of a significant reform of the system, our research findings show five key thematic areas for changes at both a national and local level:

1. **Improve governance structures for tackling destitution**
2. **Provide clear and transparent information and advice so that people know their rights**
3. **Empower local government to, at a minimum, meet its legal responsibilities and ultimately develop preventative approaches to tackling poverty and exclusion**
4. **Widen entitlement to public funds to support the most vulnerable**
5. **Listen and learn from people with lived experience of migrant destitution**

1. Improve governance structures for tackling destitution

To improve national policy, central government should:

- **Adequately resource local government through dedicated funding to ensure they are able to provide appropriate support** to people facing destitution.
- Empower **Strategic Migration Partnerships to include support for ending migrant destitution within their remit and coordinate existing NRPF networks at regional and devolved administration level.**
- Develop a **cross-government UK-wide strategy to tackle migrant destitution, including developing statutory guidance in England and working with the devolved administrations, to draft guidance in Northern Ireland, update and improve guidance in Wales and better implement existing guidance in Scotland.**
- Use **new burdens assessments to properly ascertain the impact on migrant destitution of imposing the NRPF condition on new categories**, and provide local government funding accordingly.
- Agree a **pragmatic approach to Home Office decision-making for immigration applications** for adults with complex care and support needs.

Data

- Central government should implement a **duty and provide financial support for local government to systematically collate data** on the numbers of people with NRPF supported.
- Local government should **improve the quality of data recorded** to systematically evidence the numbers of people supported and provision costs.

Strategy

Senior leadership within local government should:

- Recognise the **significant impact of failing to tackle migrant destitution in addressing strategic priorities** such as ending child poverty, [ending rough sleeping](#), improving public health, preventing violence against women and girls and demonstrating due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- Ensure there is a **joined-up ending migrant destitution strategy**, covering policy and provision across children's social care, adult social care and housing, particularly in two-tier local authorities.
- Elected members should **upskill themselves on the issues facing destitute migrant people and proactively lead on this area of work**, drawing on good practice from the [Migrant Champions Network](#) and the [City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network](#).

2. Provide clear and transparent information and advice so that people know their rights:

- Local government should address the lack of clear and publicly available information on support available by **providing, at a minimum, a publicly accessible page on their website with information** about referral processes, access to immigration advice and local community support.
- Local government financial inclusions teams should **take an earlier preventative approach by proactively reaching out to migrant communities** at risk of falling into deep poverty, including information on fee waivers, change of conditions applications, free school meals and access to childcare.
- Local government should put into place a **clear protocol for frontline services on referring people to advice services if they do not meet the threshold for support.**
- In the absence of central government reinstating legal aid for immigration matters, regional and local government should **fund or commission dedicated legal aid advice** for residents at risk of destitution.
- Local government should **set up safe spaces with clear firewalls for legal advice** on routes to regularisation and access to services, developed in partnership with the third sector and faith-based organisations.
- Central government should ensure there is **clearer and more publicly available information on the process of applying to lift the NRPF condition, including a more explicit right to appeal refusals.**

3. Empower local government to, at a minimum, meet its legal responsibilities and ultimately develop preventative approaches to tackling poverty and exclusion

Financial support (subsistence payments)

- Local government should develop **localised subsistence policies with clear minimum acceptable rates**, building in the flexibility to adapt to individuals' needs.
- In the absence of localised subsistence policies, central government should provide **statutory guidance to local authorities specifying minimum acceptable rates for subsistence**, taking into account individuals' needs and ensuring rates are regularly reviewed and in line with inflation.
- Local government should **ensure payment systems for vulnerable people with NRPF are fit for purpose**; ensuring payments are regular, accessible and prioritising cash over the use of vouchers.

Assessment and case working

- Local government should **follow and embed NRPF Network guidance**, endorsed by the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) and **use the [Support for migrant families web tool](#)** to establish available options for families.
- Social care teams should develop training to **embed recently developed best practice [guidance for children's services social workers](#)** and seek to develop similar guidance for adult social care.
- Local government should ensure there is a **consistent, standardised and sensitive assessment and case management process** that treats people with respect and dignity.
- Local government **should actively involve vulnerable people's advisors and advocates** from third sector organisations in assessments and case management discussions to promote people's best interests in all decision-making.

Housing

- Senior leadership within local government should ensure that their **[homelessness strategy](#) specifically assesses local homelessness and housing need related to immigration status**, including people affected by NRPF.
- Central government should **set out limits on appropriate use of accommodation, for example a 6-week limit on the use of hotels/B&Bs in keeping with homelessness legislation**, along with adequate funding for local authorities to provide it.
- Drawing on the learning from 'Everyone In', central government should ensure that housing departments have the **capacity and funding to provide emergency accommodation to vulnerable adults when needed, regardless of immigration status**.
- Central government should commit to **maintaining the local housing allowance in line with at least the cheapest 30% of local rents**, so that people can access suitable homes in the private rented sector.

4. Widen entitlement to public funds to support the most vulnerable

- Central government should remove all **discretionary welfare funds, including those designed by devolved administrations, from the list of public funds**. This would allow local government to provide discretionary cost of living and emergency support to all residents in need, regardless of their immigration status and would also ensure devolved administrations can meet their policy objectives, including enabling Scotland to meet its [Ending Destitution Together strategy](#) aims.
- Central government should **grant mainstream access to those benefits and passported benefits especially intended to support vulnerable people and children** to ensure they are open to all children and vulnerable people, regardless of their or their parents' immigration status.
- Central government should grant all **people with pre-settled status access to means-tested benefits and homelessness assistance**.

5. Listen and learn from people with lived experience of migrant destitution

Both central and local government should:

- Apply **principles within decision-making and frontline services that promote “fairness, openness and effective care**, and embed the idea that people will always be treated with respect and dignity” as recommended in the [Windrush Lessons Learned Review](#).
- **Actively involve people with lived experience in co-producing and designing local strategy, policy and practice** as well as in the joint commissioning of services.
- Ensure their **workforce developing NRPf policy and services includes people with lived experience**.

Local government should:

- **Actively seek anonymised feedback** from both service users and people assessed as not meeting the threshold, to audit service quality.
- Ensure there is an **accessible anonymous complaints procedure for service users**.
- Ensure frontline services are **accessible to navigate, considering in-person assessments and meetings** where possible.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT DESTITUTION IN THE UK

Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK is a UK-wide research and knowledge exchange project (2022–2024), funded by abrDN Financial Fairness Trust and focusing on social care practice and provision for vulnerable migrant people with no recourse to public funds (NRPf) facing destitution.

Building on COMPAS' (2015) research on Safeguarding Children From Destitution: Local Authority Responses To Families With 'No Recourse To Public Funds', the study uses a mixed methods approach, helping to increase understanding of the characteristics of the group impacted by the NRPf policy and exploring how a more proactive approach to NRPf provision can have a wider impact on overall levels of poverty and destitution.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/understanding-migrant-destitution-in-the-uk

THE GLOBAL EXCHANGE ON MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity is an ambitious initiative at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) opening up opportunities for knowledge exchange and longer-term collaboration between those working in the migration field.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/global-exchange